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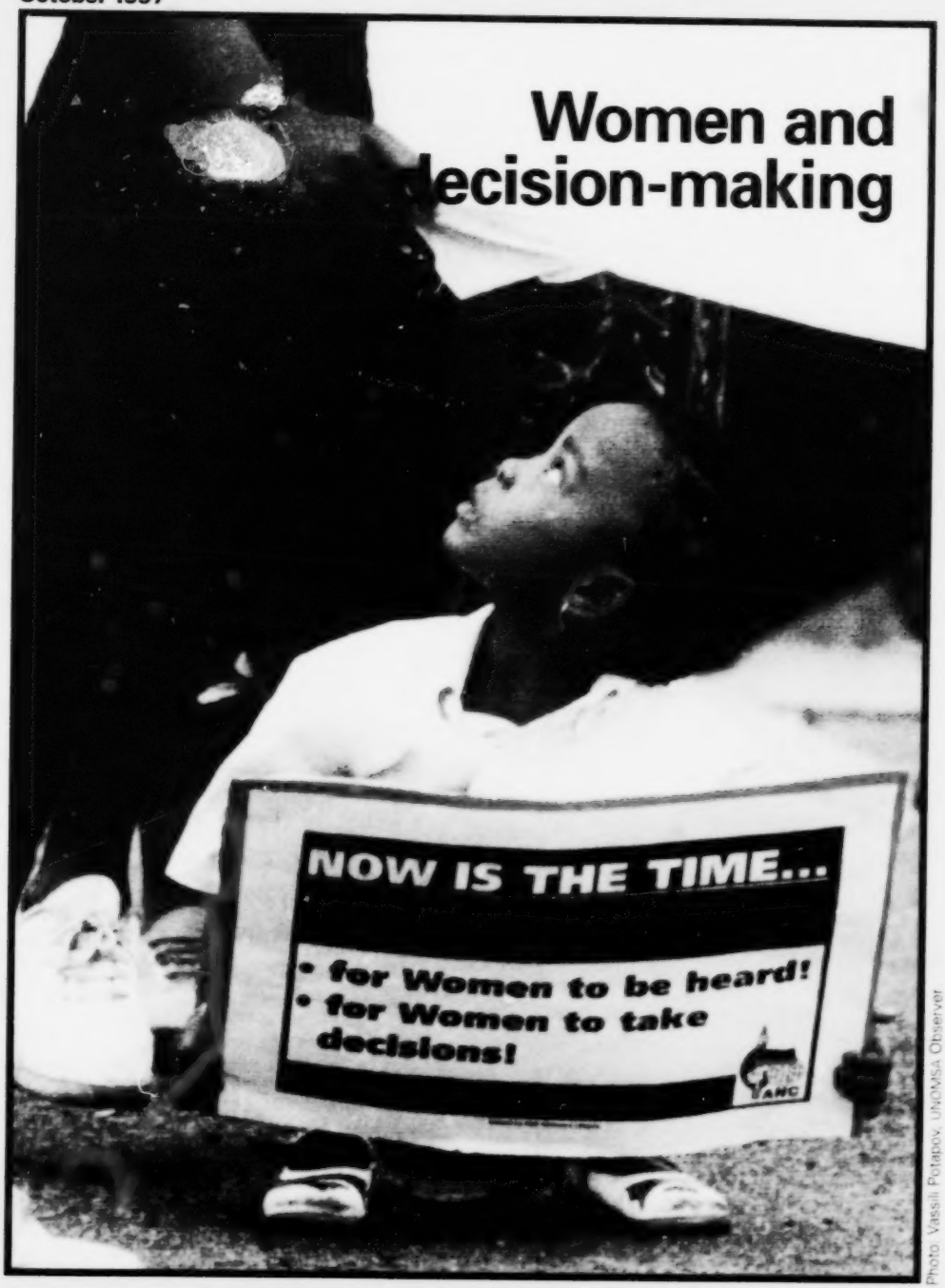
Women and decision-making



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UNITED NATIONS
Division for the Advancement of Women
Department of Economic and Social Affairs

Women and decision-making

"You agree, then . . . that men and women are to have a common way of life . . . — common education, common children; and they are to watch over the citizens in common whether abiding in the city or going out to war? . . . And in so doing they will . . . preserve the natural relation of the sexes."

The Republic, *Plato (428-348 BC)*

INTRODUCTION

At the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China, in 1995, the global community stressed the importance of women assuming positions of power and influence, not only because their points of view and talents are needed, but also as a matter of their human rights. Moreover, increased involvement of women in decision-making processes with respect to social values, development directions and allocation of resources enables women as well as men to influence societal agendas and to help set priorities. Efforts to achieve gender equality are thus more likely to be brought into the mainstream of decision-making and to be pursued from the centre rather than the margins.[1]

Yet questions about both style and substance persist where women and decision-making are concerned. As many historians listen, they hear the echo of questions raised at different times in different parts of the world when the right to vote and to hold office was granted to working men who had neither the property nor the level of income that, earlier, had qualified men as "responsible" citizens.

Like the questions at that time about working men's participation in the exercise of public power, interest in gender-based differences and similarities in approaches to decision-making has increased in recent years and has been the topic of a growing number of leadership training seminars and workshops in different parts of the world. This issue of ***women*** *2000* offers some recent evidence on women's entry into the "corridors of power", whether in governance, business or other public domains, along with conclusions of a number of the studies on women's decision-making styles and focus. The purpose of this edition is to present issues, stimulate research and, above all, provoke discussion.

In exploring the question of women's role in decision-making, particularly in the public sphere, the term "corridors of power" itself may need scrutiny. In many cultures, people think of the space in which authority is exercised as small and exclusive. Why don't we speak instead of "arenas of power", "theatres of power" or, in an age of democracy, "amphitheatres"? A number of groups, among them women's activists, have called for using power openly and inclusively rather than in a hierarchical and exclusive manner. They also suggest that negotiation and consensus-building are among women's special abilities, along with the ability to listen, to see beyond one's own point of view and to adapt rapidly. According to a number of today's business thinkers, these are just the qualities needed in today's ferociously competitive economic environment.[2]

Some of these groups have also claimed that because of inborn altruism or their roles as mothers, women leaders would foster societies of peace and nurturing. In much the same way, they have assumed that women captains of trade and industry would advance economic justice. In addition, since the environmental movements of the 1960s and 1970s, some women's advocates have argued that women are natural caretakers of the environment — largely because in many rural societies, women have managed water, food and fuel resources and employed their knowledge handed down from generation to generation about herbal medicines and other natural products.[3]

But for every peacemaking woman monarch, a comparable warrior queen comes out of history's pages. For every female environmental healer, there is an exemplar of unsustainable consumption. Although much of the

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The United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, in support of the Commission on the Status of Women (the international intergovernmental body charged with securing the advancement of women), has been exploring the question of women and decision-making for some time. In 1989, an expert group met in Vienna to consider "Equality in Political Participation and Decision-Making". Another expert group met in 1991, in Vienna, to discuss "Women in Public Life". "Gender and the Agenda for Peace" was the focus of a 1994 expert group meeting in New York, while another expert meeting in that same year examined "Women and Economic Decision-Making". In 1996, two United Nations expert group meetings addressed these issues. The first considered "Political Decision-Making and Conflict

data on women and decision-making have been anecdotal, an increasing number of full-scale studies are emerging based on the growing number of examples of women decision-makers in public life. But until women's participation rate reaches the level of "critical mass", generalization is difficult. This critical mass can be defined as the proportion of 30 to 35 per cent that, in any group, may result in marked differences in content and priorities, often leading to changes in management style, group dynamics and organizational culture.

THE PERILS OF STEREOTYPES

Almost every class in every culture around the globe has projected an ideal of the woman who endures and sacrifices for her children, her family or her people. But worldwide there are also other visible images of women. In Viet Nam 1,000 years ago, legend has it, two princesses overthrew Chinese oppression for the first time in that country's history. In seventeenth-century Jamaica, Nanny of the Maroons is reputed to have outwitted the British for three decades. And from contemporary India comes the modern folk heroine Phoolan Devi, the "Bandit Queen". Despite adverse circumstances, she fought for the oppressed and later became a Member of Parliament. When we look at stereotypes of male behaviour, exceptions can also be cited.

What does modern science say? According to a number of experts, the vast outpouring of research since the 1980s has shown fewer differences between men and women based on gender than differences that grow out of disparities in income, household responsibility or access to power.[5]

Despite such examples, the belief that any one group of people is inherently predisposed — usually by heredity — to perform one or another function in society, such as to rule or to enjoy whatever a culture considers privileged, has persisted in some quarters and has been described by scholars as "essentialism". The idea of essentialism probably reaches back into prehistory. The oldest and most universal essentialism concerns the "nature" of women as distinct from the "nature" of men — with whom "human nature" is generally associated in western culture. Some scholars have subscribed to an essentialist philosophy to defend women as having a particular style or approach.

Problems arise from essentialism. One is to equate identity with beliefs and behaviour. If a person is defined by any trait that is considered dominant by those who do the defining, he or she is also expected to hold certain convictions, exhibit certain behaviour patterns and take certain actions. Whether these convictions, behaviours or actions are judged good or bad, beneficial or destructive, essentialist perspectives tend to deny or gloss over differences within a given group — even a group defined by a set of ideas, such as a religion or a political philosophy. All Christians, for example, might be presumed to adhere to a particular creed — or all socialists or feminists; the creeds or behaviour themselves are at best represented simplistically, one or another element eclipsing the complex whole.

One analyst points out that if we reduce human beings to one or another facet of their identity, we reduce enormously the possibility of human change — whether of groups or individuals — through education and experience.[6] Essentialism thereby endangers reform as well — certainly to the extent that it aims at reforming values, attitudes and behaviours. It is just as dangerous to champion women in terms of immutable biological traits as it is to ignore the needs that arise from these traits or to subjugate women because of them.

Since women inhabit the globe in much the same proportions as men, it is not surprising that they are as diverse as men. Over and against any concept of an inborn and universal female identity, the Fourth World Conference on Women set gender issues in the context of the evolution of societies and characterized women's diversity as an asset to all aspects of human development. A major message of Beijing was that stereotypes should be avoided — particularly those that make assumptions about female and male traits.

Issues and styles: Gender dimensions

Despite their diversity, however, there appear to be specific kinds of issues women tend to champion, and they appear to bring distinctive styles to leadership. Arguably, such similarities can be traced to the different positions women hold in society, the ways in which different societies constrain women or enable them to fulfil their human potential and the distinct roles that society expects them to play in relation to men, rather than any supposedly "innate" female or male qualities. Whether as mothers or caregivers concerned with basic

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Resolution: the Impact of Gender Differences", and was held at the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. The second was "Women and Economic Decision-Making in International Financial Institutions and Transnational Corporations", held at Simmons College, Boston, Mass.

At its forty-first session in 1997, the Commission on the Status of Women considered a critical area of concern, women and power and decision-making, and called for acceleration of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in this area. Governments were called upon, *inter alia*, to take into account diverse decision-making styles and to project positive images of women in politics and public life.

needs or, in times of war and conflict, as protectors and mediators, women are often directly responsible for the immediate survival of their families. Although their particular concerns and styles may vary from one society to another (and within societies), they tend to bring to governance and other public-sector affairs a perspective that in some measure reflects their social and cultural position and the prevailing gendered division of power.

Attributes women bring to public life: One expert group view

- **A particular concern for justice and the ethical dimension of politics, derived in part from their experience of injustice**
- **A talent for setting priorities and accomplishing complex tasks learned in the course of balancing competing demands for their time and attention in the family, at work and in the community**
- **An awareness of the value of consensus and agreement, because of their central role in social relationships**
- **A concern for future generations**[8]

The differences displayed by women and men must therefore be examined in relation to enduring social structures. Gender socialization begins in infancy for both girls and boys. The power relations between women and men are enforced and reinforced throughout their lives. As two social scientists have remarked, "The gender dimensions of multiple social structures interact and, in effect, 'discipline' individual behaviour to conform to stereotypes."[7]

So it is that women in authority have often assumed male attributes, even male dress. In Egypt 3,500 years ago, the only woman Pharaoh, Hatshepsut, had to put on a beard of lapis lazuli and a male kilt for ceremonial occasions. It was the only way she could perform the central ritual of Egyptian kingship, by which the god-monarch every morning celebrated the sun's rebirth and re-transmitted life to the people of the Nile valley. In literature, Shakespeare's Portia, in *The Merchant of Venice*, amazes everyone with her legal skill — by which she "tempers justice with mercy" and outwits the villain in his lawsuit for a pound of flesh. But she does so disguised as a man. Similarly, both Indira Gandhi and Margaret Thatcher were termed "statesmen" and contemporary women executives wear "power suits". The reverse, a man imitating a woman, is less frequent, particularly if the aim is to portray public power and influence.

In the early 1940s, a British diplomat summed up his view of women and political life that is still widely believed. There were three feminine qualities — "zeal, sympathy and intuition" — that he considered dangerous in international affairs unless kept under the firmest control. The ideal diplomat, in his view, needed "male" qualities such as "impartiality and imperturbability", and, he surmised, needed to be "a trifle inhuman".[9] Recently, an exit poll conducted by the University of Namibia in that country's regional and local elections found that about one fourth of the respondents said they would find it difficult to vote for a woman candidate because "women are not suitable".[10]

By contrast, in many countries today, some transnational corporations trying to survive in a highly competitive world appear to be "finding common ground with the values that women have been raised and socialized to hold".[11] These so-called "female principles", according to Anita Roddick, who founded a transnational firm, include:

> *principles of caring, making intuitive decisions, not getting hung up on hierarchy or all those dreadfully boring business-school management ideas, having a sense of work as being part of your life, not separate from it, putting your labour where your love is, being responsible to the world in how you use your profits, recognizing the bottom line should stay there — at the bottom.*[12]

Notably, trends towards democratization and greater participation in both business and government point towards valuing traits that women acquire through socialization.

> *Organizations of different kinds are now going through a 'feminization' of their structures, some more rapidly than others, creating more space for the discussion and valuing of personal issues and problems, as well as reconsidering a more intuitive style of decision-making. Some of them are relying on more inclusive and horizontal schemes of power and responsibility. Teamwork and organization-wide communication processes are becoming common in business organizations and governments . . .*[13]

As early as 1932, psychologist Jean Piaget observed that girls showed a greater tendency than boys to make exceptions to the rules and were better able to adapt to innovation.[14] Exploring this view further during the 1970s, sociologist Nancy Chodorow observed:

> *Girls emerge with a stronger basis for experiencing another's needs or feelings as one's own (or of thinking that one is experiencing another's needs and feelings) . . . From very early, then, because they were parented by a person of the same gender . . . girls come to experience themselves as less differentiated than boys, as more continuous with and related to the external object-world as well.*[15]

In 1982, psychologist Carol Gilligan added her observation, echoed by many others, that men are most comfortable in hierarchical structures of organization, while women prefer weblike structures — and that this largely unconscious difference in perception explains many of the tensions between the sexes. She noted that:

> *as the top of the hierarchy becomes the edge of the web and as the centre of a network of connection becomes the middle of a hierarchical progression, each image marks as dangerous the place which the other defines as safe. Men's wish to be alone at the top and the consequent fear that others will get too close contrasts . . . with women's wish to be at the centre of connection and their consequent fear of being too far out on the edge.*[16]

As one woman remarked of a London Borough Council, "It continually shocks me how male working culture is not about delivery. They're about status, position, about being, not doing. Women want to see results, are prepared to be flexible and make changes in themselves."[17]

A prominent Indonesian woman business executive recently stated, "I'm more supportive than my male colleagues . . . . Clients relax and talk more. And fifty per cent of my effectiveness is based on volunteered information."[18]

Ireland's former President Mary Robinson, now United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, puts things somewhat differently:

> *Women speak from their experience and work outwards, and do so with increasing confidence as they find that what they are saying is at least as valid as what they're hearing from other sources. I do feel that women tend on the whole to draw more from their experience and to want to play a role in a power structure to influence change – it's part of a whole different reference point. Women in most contexts are coming from a kind of minority, if not marginalized, position into one where they're trying to move nearer the centre, and that brings with it all the empathy, the listening, and the sense of questioning . . .*[20]

Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, a recent candidate for the presidency of Liberia, has stated her belief that:

> *Women's vision for their societies often differs from men's because they understand clearly the impact of distorted priorities on their families and communities. The vision of women is one of inclusion not exclusion, peace not conflict, integrity not corruption, and consensus not imposition.*[21]

Moreover, women's styles may be affected by the distinctive issues that they tend to support and fight for — always allowing for individual points of view. For example, a 1997 survey of female state legislators in the United States, conducted by the Centre for the American Woman in Politics (CAWP) revealed significant differences of opinion between these women and their male counterparts not only on "women's issues", such as the adoption of the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution and proposed limits on abortion. More of them opposed capital punishment (49 per cent to 33 per cent) and the construction of new nuclear power plants (84 per cent to 71 per cent). They expressed greater scepticism about the ability of the private sector to solve economic, social and environmental problems (53 per cent to 41 per cent), and often voted across party lines. They also felt more strongly than men (57 per cent to 32 per cent) that legislative business should be conducted in public view rather than behind closed doors.[22]

Gender differences in voting patterns have also emerged at the national level, and have been charted in the European Union. Women tend to oppose nuclear weapons, capital punishment and racial discrimination and are more pacifist than men; they tend to favour social welfare programmes and, in the world of paid work, shorter hours and reduced incomes for workers as a way of increasing overall employment.

Gender preferences in issues addressed have been observed in the media. Although women have so far had little influence worldwide in altering mainstream media policy, growing numbers of women journalists in various countries have brought quality of life and social issues into front-page prominence. They have also expanded the range of "newsworthy" subjects to include women's health, family and child care, sexual harassment and discrimination, rape and battering, and homeless mothers. Further, as Margaret Gallagher writes in the UNESCO survey *An Unfinished Story*, women can change the way in which established issues are covered:

Some differences in women's and men's leadership styles

Men's Leadership Styles

- **Maintained a complex network of relationships with people outside their organizations**
- **Identified themselves with their jobs**
- **Had difficultly sharing information**

Women's Leadership Styles

- **Maintained a complex network of relationships with people inside and outside their organizations**
- **Saw their own identities as complex and multifaceted**
- **Scheduled time for sharing information**[19]

One obvious example is the coverage of the war in Bosnia, in which women reporters focused worldwide attention on the systematic rape of women as a weapon of war. Again, the issue of 'critical mass' is important. Women have been reporting war for decades, but the war in the former Yugoslavia drew women journalists in unprecedented numbers.[23]

WHERE ARE THE WOMEN DECISION-MAKERS TODAY?

More than two decades after the first United Nations conference on women in 1975, the statistical picture for women's participation at high levels of decision-making remains bleak — certainly in the terms spelt out by the Platform of Action adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995.

Women in the public sector

Whereas historically there have been a number of women rulers (e.g. queens and powerful consorts), today women in powerful decision-making positions are relatively few.[24] Since the end of the Second World War, 28 women have been elected as heads of Government or served as Heads of State. Only Norway and Sweden have so far achieved gender equality at the cabinet level.

Only a handful of countries have chosen women to hold the portfolios of foreign policy, finance, trade or defence — sectors that were not only traditionally dominated by men, but that also are pivotal in international relations and can be viewed as the "public" face of a nation, in contrast to its domestic or "private" face. At present, only in the Caribbean do women represent more than 20 per cent of ministers in fields outside the social fields and in departments of justice.

In Africa, only a handful of high executive offices, including ministries outside the areas of social affairs, have been held by women. These included, in 1994, Uganda's Vice President, Botswana's and Liberia's Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Burundi's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Ghana's Minister of Trade and Industry.

At the international level, of the 185 United Nations Member States, only seven women head permanent diplomatic missions as of mid-1997: the Dominican Republic, Guinea, Jamaica, Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, Liechtenstein and Turkmenistan. At the United Nations Secretariat level, only five United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, of which there are 36 altogether, are headed by women: the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Food Programme. Women also head important entities dealing with human rights, the war crimes tribunals and the disarmament institute.

In senior national civil service positions, the number of women has continued to increase — still largely in social welfare ministries, which have traditionally been associated with some of women's "caring" activities, but to a lesser extent in others, such as energy, agriculture and the environment. These latter ministries have been dominated by men — perhaps because of the current prominence of these areas in the economic and foreign policy agendas of Governments. While the fields of health, education, housing and community development doubtless mirror major concerns of many women throughout the world, female concentration in these ministries perpetuates traditions of women managing women and certainly does not reflect the growing numbers of women economists, management experts, lawyers and engineers.

For parliaments, the record world average of women's representation was reached in 1988, when women representatives accounted for 14.8 per cent of all parliamentarians. In 1995, this dropped to 11.3 per cent.[27] The current world average of 11.7 per cent[28] still indicates a situation in which women are regarded at best as a "special-interest group" rather than half of humankind.

In one paper after another from different parts of the world, whether government report or scholarly study, men's control over women at the

Close-up: Norway

In 1972, when Norway's small, new Social Democratic party ruled that women should be elected to half its posts at each level, political life throughout the country took a turn towards gender balance. By the spring of 1976, all six parties in parliament had either a woman leader or one who strongly favoured women's issues. Eager to attract new voters — or keep others from defecting — each party increasingly nominated women candidates. Almost all institutionalized quotas. Today, 40 per cent of parliamentary seats are reserved for women. Moreover, since 1988, Norway's Equal Status Act has mandated at least 40 per cent representation on all other public committees, boards and agencies, both elective and appointive.

Nonetheless, in Norway, as in the rest of Scandinavia, old gender patterns persist in the workplace, even in public-sector jobs. Women still perform almost 90 per cent of the country's caretaking, whether of children or the elderly, and spend nearly twice as much time as men in unpaid work.[25]

The Beijing Platform for Action

"The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to take part in the Government of his/her country . . . . Achieving the goal of equal participation of women and men in decision-making will provide a balance that more accurately reflects the composition of society and is needed in order to strengthen democracy and promote its proper functioning. Equality in political decision-making performs a leverage function without which it is highly unlikely that a real integration of the equality dimension in government policy-making is feasible . . . ."

household level emerges as a major barrier to women's effective participation in public affairs. In a number of instances — whatever their situation in the civil law of the land — women must obtain the consent of their husbands to enter public life. According to Janet Mukwaya, Minister of Gender and Community Development in Uganda, "The woman politician has to learn to balance her time between politics and her traditional gender role of reproduction and housekeeping."[29]

In older democracies, too, argues the English activist Georgina Ashworth, the "male culture of politics" acts as a major barrier to women who wish to serve in public life. This institutional culture, she adds, is characterized by "adversarial proceedings, the coercion to conform to the central interests of the parties, the timing of meetings and sessions, the pervasiveness of patronage, the distance of politics from daily realities . . ."[30]

Women's participation in local politics has long been viewed as an extension of women's traditional involvement in household management. This idea can be used either to devalue or to promote efforts to increase women's numbers in local government, where their political activity has so far been most marked. However, current trends towards the devolution of power may make holding local office a far more powerful and prestigious occupation than it has been up to the present. Because so many women still shoulder disproportionate responsibilities for household management and therefore cannot leave home for remote capitals, devolution provides a significant means of making their voices heard nationally.

Women in the private sector

The movement of more and more power into the marketplace, both nationally and transnationally, raises the important question of the extent to which women have entered decision-making in the private sector of the economy.

Little research has so far been carried out on the subject of women in senior management — itself a reflection of the low status of the issue. A 1996 survey of women in top management posts in US Fortune 500 companies revealed that women held only 2 per cent of the highest-paid positions and 10 per cent of corporate officer posts. The figure was the same for the top management positions of Finland, Malaysia and Morocco.

In South Africa, where the post-apartheid situation pits race sharply against gender, often to the detriment of the latter, 41 women occupied high executive office in the country's leading 100 companies. Despite unprecedented rates of economic growth in the Republic of Korea, the proportion of women occupying board seats remained constant at 0.1 per cent between 1985 and 1992; at the level of department head, percentages moved from 0 to 0.1.[31] According to *Business Week* in 1992, at current rates, it will take 475 years before women reach equality in the executive suite.[32]

However, as one observer notes:

we are in the midst of a profound paradigm shift in which large numbers of women who entered the workplace nearly a quarter of a century ago and have paid their dues in middle-management positions, are poised to enter the senior levels of corporations and public office in record numbers. These women have the capacity to profoundly change the nature of the workplace . . .[33]

Another trend supports the idea that women may soon be much more prominent in high-level corporate decision-making: many new business thinkers believe that diversity is essential to developing new markets — especially because women represent a fast-growing share of consumers for a vast variety of products and services beyond those usually associated with household needs. In the United States, although women's earnings are only 70 per cent of men's, that sum is almost $400 billion.[34]

From a "rational" business point of view, excluding women from leadership positions is simply a waste of

Women at ministerial and sub-ministerial levels

- **The number of women ministers worldwide doubled from 3.4 per cent in 1987 to 6.8 per cent in 1996**
- **Globally, 15 countries have achieved 20 per cent to 30 per cent women at the ministerial level**
- **In 48 countries, there were no women ministers**
- **Globally, only 9.9 per cent of all sub-ministerial positions (Deputy Minister, Permanent Secretary and Deputy Permanent Secretary) were held by women**
- **In 136 countries, women held no ministerial positions concerned with the economy**
- **In 1997, two women headed Governments, while three others were heads of State**[35]

talent. None the less, it remains necessary to "sell" this elementary notion to most corporations. Where this has been done, as among the member companies of the British campaign Opportunity 2000, women's share of corporate board directors rose from 5 per cent to 11.2 per cent after less than five years.[35] By mid-1997, 20 high-profile women had launched the Women's Leadership Conference of the Americas, funded by the Inter-American Development Bank, to bring more women to the economic as well as political front lines of the western hemisphere.

According to a recent study, two major problems plague the appointment of women to top private-sector posts. First, businesswomen tend to specialize rather than to go into general management — the latter generally being viewed as the experience essential to the highest ranks of decision-making. Women executives tend to be clustered in such areas as personnel and training. Second — and far more difficult to change — selection for senior management posts tends to be far less formal and objective than at lower levels. At the top, membership in the "old boy network" is still considered by some to be imperative.[36] Women may overcome such obstacles by networking among themselves, as well as with strategically placed men — and, indeed, seem to be doing just that more and more each day.

To advance women in the private sector

- **Go beyond conventional methods of recruitment and conventional labour pools**
- **Modify selection profiles to reflect new skill mixes needed for changing programmes, including the ability to work in an environment of diversity and commitment to gender issues**
- **Create an environment that encourages women to move into management, and modify practices to increase their rate of selection and promotion in order to achieve a critical mass at all levels of the organization**
- **Develop practical interventions to address dual-career issues**
- **Create a work environment to enable all employees to balance work and family life**
- **Hold managers responsible for developing action plans and for achieving change in their areas of responsibility, and link it to performance evaluation and rewards**
- **Invest in developing the skills of men and women to work together in management and decision-making**
- **Encourage the growth of support systems, such as mentoring and coaching**
- **Learn from initiatives and best practices of other companies and institutions**[37]

Women and organized labour

Trade union leadership today continues to reflect the origins of the labour movement in heavy industry, and as such is predominantly male. Even in Sweden, where women have reached "critical mass" in government and politics, women hold only 20 per cent of executive posts in trade unions.

Collective bargaining still tends to be gender-blind and therefore perpetuates women's disadvantages. Nonetheless, many unions in industrialized nations now strive actively to promote gender equality rather than simply to avoid discrimination. For example, in 1991, the British Trades Union Conference (TUC) issued a guide which addressed nine major areas of inequality, including pay, training and promotion, working hours and child care. Similarly, in 1992 after a three-year struggle, the Congress of South Africa Trade Unions (COSATU) instituted the post of "gender coordinator". The coordinator helped identify as "women's problems" the lack of childcare facilities and men's lack of assistance in housework.[38]

The experience of the Korean Women Workers Association during the 1980s remains instructive because it so clearly echoed that of women who tried to organize in the west almost a century ago. Employers made such statements as "If workers were liberated, women would automatically be liberated". Male union leaders also countered women's requests with the argument that discussion of women's issues would cause confusion and division in the labour movement.[39]

Organizing workers today involves confronting two increasing problems. First, more and more jobs, notably those for women, are informal, even when they constitute an integral part of the formal sector — including the production of toys, apparel, shoes and components for high-tech industries. The experience of the Indian Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), founded in 1973, still stands as a model for the organization of women labourers doing "informal" jobs. A second labour question of growing proportions worldwide is the organization of women workers who cross borders, continents and oceans.

Women and religious bodies

In a number of religions today, there is serious debate over women's role as leaders. Despite the prominence of priestesses in many ancient religions, as well as the participation of women as deacons and leaders of congregations in early Christianity, religious authorities worldwide remain predominantly male. Where religion is identified with the State — as it generally has been historically and still is in several countries — it tends to compound the many problems of women's access to power.

Frequently, religions portray women either as the source of evil and/or chaos or as the prototype of submission and self-sacrifice — often

as both in separate figures. None of these images encourages the idea of leadership by women among citizens of either sex. In addition, the vast majority of religious institutions themselves have excluded women from leadership roles. Religious beliefs have also played a major role in positing and reinforcing the idea of the private sector/family as women's sphere and the public sector/politics as men's sphere. Often, the interpretation of religious doctrine rather than the doctrine itself tends to reinforce gender stereotyping, while the low representation of women in the leadership of religious institutions may tend to perpetuate gender insensitivity.

Of the 33 Christian denominations that make up the National Council of Churches of the United States of America, 21 Protestant churches ordain women as clergy. Even in those, however, gender discrimination persists in one or another form. In the Episcopal Church, which now numbers seven women among its bishops, male priests earn, on average, US$ 5000 a year more than their female counterparts.[41]

Women in ministries of justice and law enforcement bodies

In ancient Egypt and in the west, justice has been symbolized by women — and the facts have begun to mirror the image in many places. Since 1987, the percentage of women at the ministerial level in law and justice ministries in Europe, Canada and the United States increased from 10 per cent to 21 per cent.[42] The Chief Prosecutor of the United Nations tribunals established by the international community to try war crimes, including mass rape in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, is Canadian jurist Louise Arbour.

The recruitment of women to police positions at all levels is also vital because it is catalytic in changing attitudes towards women's exercise of power in all areas. Police on patrol are generally the closest representatives of authority outside the home. Brazil was the first of a number of Latin American countries — those of the Andean region in particular — to institute "women's police stations" that deal with gender violence, punishing a variety of crimes previously regarded as "family", "private" or "health" matters.

"The extent to which the institutions of government and civil society are able to confront the problem of gender violence is itself a measure of democracy", writes Alexandra Ayala-Marin in her recent essay on the administration of justice and changing ideas of "security" from national defense to safety in streets and homes.[43] To Kiran Bedi, former Inspector-General of Prisons in Delhi, India, police work for and of women should be a door to legal literacy and other skills and resources necessary to exercising full citizenship.[44] At the World Congress on Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, held in Stockholm from 26 to 31 August 1996, Asian, Caribbean and Latin American women called for the inclusion of women in border patrols to identify and apprehend sex traffickers, as well as the continued activity of Interpol in this growing area of international crime.

Women in the military and in peacemaking

Some countries still bar women totally from the military; some make it obligatory; almost all exclude women from combat-related duties.[45] And in a number of the revolutions of the latter half of the twentieth century whose credo has been democracy — among them that of Nicaragua — women have been urged to "earn" the right to equality with men through taking up arms. In many of the liberation movements of sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and Latin America, women have fought side by side with men. In this connection, it is also worth noting that women's movements such as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina and the Plenary of Uruguayan Women played significant roles in toppling violent military regimes in their respective countries.

Whether one advocates or opposes combat-related roles for women, many of today's political leaders have stressed their military records during their campaigns for high office, even in countries such as France and the United States of America, free of overt armed rule. In the early days of western women's suffrage, service in the armed forces was a condition for the franchise itself; in several countries after the First World War, if a woman had not actively engaged in war efforts herself, her right to vote derived from close kinship with a serviceman. Today, the ancient identification of men with armed conflict perpetuates the exclusion of women worldwide from peace and security affairs.

Consequently, with few exceptions, women are glaringly underrepresented in virtually all bodies

Close-up: Namibia

The under-representation of women among church leaders in Namibia may be one reason why Christian beliefs so often continue to take the form of conservative doctrine which works against the interests of women. For example, biblical teachings are often cited in both personal and political settings to justify the subordination of women, particularly in the family context. Church groupings continue to speak out against political reforms affecting women, such as abortion, prostitution, the liberalization of Namibia's laws on abortion and education on AIDS and family planning. The church in Namibia does not speak with one voice, however, and some church leaders have also come out in strong support of women's issues.[40]

directly concerned with conflict resolution and the peace-building process in ravaged countries. Commenting on this phenomenon, Angela King, United Nations Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women and former head of the United Nations Observer Mission in South Africa, put forward what she called two principles of concern:

When a critical mass of women is involved in a peace-related mission, women in the host country, often a key element in the settlement of disputes at the community level, are mobilized through a positive demonstration effect of the role models of the women on the mission.

The presence of women peacekeepers seems to be a potent ingredient in fostering and maintaining confidence and trust among the local population.[47]

Does this trust grow out of a feeling that most women appear to have a somewhat different approach to violence, conflict and the resolution of conflict than most men involved in peace and security matters? This was one of the conclusions reached by an Expert Group Meeting on Political Decision-Making and Conflict Resolution organized jointly by the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women and the International Peace Research Institute of Oslo in 1996. These experts also advocated "an overhaul of the idea of what constitutes security" in the light of "the importance of peace as a means for achieving democracy". Further, they stated that "the absence of women from decision-making processes indicates a value system that supports gender stereotypes that are not conducive to peace".[48]

INCREASING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING

In order to increase the number of women in decision-making in public life, a variety of strategies aimed at greater equality for women in decision-making have been introduced under the rubric "affirmative action" or "positive measures".

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women makes clear that such measures are not discriminatory:

Adoption by States Parties of temporary measures aimed at accelerating de facto equality between men and women shall not be considered discrimination but shall in no way entail as a consequence the maintenance of unequal or separate standards; these measures shall be discontinued when the objectives of equality of opportunity and treatment have been achieved.[49]

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, in its General Recommendation 23 on articles 7 and 8 of the Convention on Women in Public Life, emphasizes the importance placed by the Convention on equality of opportunity and participation in public life and decision-making, including at all levels and in all areas of international affairs. It addresses comments and recommendations to States parties to be taken into account in their review of laws and policies and in reporting under the Convention and stresses the importance of the use of temporary special measures in these contexts.[50]

At the International Development Conference in 1997, Edith Ssempale, Uganda's Ambassador to the United States, stated that any kind of affirmative action should "act as a catalyst in demonstrating what is possible". A Canadian attorney, speaking on measures to right gender imbalance in private-sector employment as well as political representation, commented, "They say affirmative action doesn't work. But I say we really haven't tried."[51] None the less, Marcela Bordenave of the Argentinean Parliament credited the increase of women in Parliament, resulting from a quota system, with the passage of a number of new issues from reproductive health to retirement.

In Africa, Eritrea, Uganda, and the United Republic of Tanzania have introduced gender quotas for parliaments, while major political parties in Botswana, South Africa and Zambia have instituted minimum thresholds. Recent multi-party elections throughout the subcontinent have had mixed results. In Angola, Cape Verde,

Close-up: Nicaragua

In terms of the advancement of women, Nicaragua presents a variety of paradoxes. Although women constituted approximately 30 per cent of the Frente Sandinista de Liberacion (FSLN) guerrillas and had played major roles in political protest for two decades before the Front came to power in 1979, they were regarded by many of their male comrades as "earning" basic rights through revolutionary involvement rather than based on a concept of women's intrinsic equality with men.

The Sandinista Movement of Nicaraguan Women (AMNLAE) worked to promote the advancement of women in all spheres, including their integration into grass-roots and labour organizations. In the campaign that cut Nicaraguan illiteracy from 50 to 13 per cent within a year, women constituted 60 per cent of the volunteer instructors — many, like their Cuban counterparts during the 1960s, leaving comfortable urban homes to live among indigenous peasants in the war-devastated countryside. They also helped domestic servants unionize in towns and cities, established cooperatives and public health projects, and helped pass a law for the sharing of household chores between women and men.

The 1990 election of Violeta Chamorro and her coalition derived in part from weariness of counter-insurgency and continued warfare; men and women together voted in large numbers for an end to carnage and the military draft.[52]

Commonwealth action plan for increasing the representation of women in politics: Eight strategy areas

1. **Setting targets**
2. **Affirmative action**
3. **Review of electoral systems**
4. **Public awareness campaigns**
5. **Encouraging women to join politics**
6. **Support for women candidates**
7. **Support for women parliamentarians**
8. **Support for women in democratization, peace and conflict resolution**[54]

Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, and Sao Tome and Principe, the proportion of women in parliaments has fallen. By contrast, it has risen in Ethiopia, Mozambique and South Africa.[52]

In Central and Eastern Europe, where quotas for many categories of representation, including gender, had existed in a wide spectrum of public institutions before the transition to market systems in the late 1980s, women's participation in legislatures dropped sharply — from 22 per cent in 1987 to 6.5 per cent in 1993. This was largely as a result of competitive politics introduced in the wake of democracy. But it has begun to increase once more. In Hungary, Poland and Turkmenistan, the proportion of women members of parliaments has risen respectively to 11.4, 13 and 18 per cent, the last two figures above the world average.[53]

Through the experience of the Indian Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRI), 1 million women have actively entered political life in India. Although the Parliament recently rejected a hard-fought-for female quota for its members, in 1993 and 1994, constitutional amendments allotted one third of the seats in local councils, both urban and rural (*gram panchayats*) to women. The *gram panchayats* were given the responsibility for designing, implementing and monitoring social services — notably health and education — and anti-poverty programmes. Since the creation of the quota system, local women — the vast majority of them illiterate and poor — have come to occupy as many as 43 per cent of the seats, spurring the election of increasing numbers of women at the district, provincial and national levels.

According to the Indian activist Devaki Jain, this has helped many "affirm their identity as women with particular and shared experiences". Their participation, Jain adds, has moved such issues as water, alcohol abuse, sexual trafficking and tourism, education, health and domestic violence closer to centre stage.[55]

ALTERNATIVE ROUTES TO POWER AND INFLUENCE

The non-governmental path

In many countries women have built upon long traditions of volunteering in service organizations to enter other arenas of decision-making. The influence of women's NGOs has been particularly manifest at the global conferences of the United Nations, with women's groups gaining recognition at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, shaping the agenda at the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, and participating as active lobbyists at the 1996 World Food Summit in Rome.

The historical moment for civil society has been particularly opportune in the post–cold war period and, as globalization has come to characterize the end of this century, the women's movement has emerged as a force to be reckoned with internationally. As one anthropologist has pointed out:

> *with the expansion of transnational activity not subject to the laws of nations, the responsibility of governments to ensure justice, economic and otherwise, and to protect people from policies that threaten their livelihoods or their very lives has taken on new urgency. The strategies that women have used and might use to engage and confront the private sector, state and international organizations are critical for the future.*"

Starting small and medium-sized enterprises

Weary of trying to crack "the glass ceiling" after a difficult climb from "the sticky floor" of large corporations and, in some cases, in order to have more control over their time and workplaces, more and more women are starting small businesses. In the United States alone, women own or control more than 6.5 million enterprises with fewer than 500 employees — approximately 30 per cent of the country's businesses.[57] In the Philippines, women constitute some 70 per cent of self-employed workers — not just in trading and services associated with homemaking skills, such as restaurants and hotels, but in consumer electronics, semi-conductors, computers and their applications, car manufacturing and machinery and other durable goods. Much the same is true for Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand.[58] In a number of OECD countries — among them Australia and Canada — small and medium-sized enterprises owned by women are growing at a faster rate than the economy as a whole.

Perhaps because of the difficulties they encounter in obtaining financing, women entrepreneurs tend to go into the retail and service trades, where

start-up costs are lower than in manufacturing and other businesses. In Mexico, women make up 23 per cent of such entrepreneurs, whereas they account for 11 per cent of ownership in manufacturing, 6.5 per cent in the oil and gas industries and 2.5 per cent in construction.[59] In view of the enormous growth of the service sector worldwide, coupled with the amplified access to information provided by the computer revolution, women's current leadership in this area may augur well for their rise in other private-sector fields as well.

Alternative banking

In some countries, women have thwarted the male banking structure by creating their own solutions. Rebuffed by India's major bank in its request for financing, the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) set up its own savings association as the capital base for loans to its members. In Trinidad and Tobago, when women failed to obtain start-up funding for their businesses, they formed a *susu* — a traditional, informal savings and loan group — and "blanked" the banks.[60] In much the same way, the age-old "merry-go-rounds" of Kenyan woman — which once used maize and millet rather than bank notes as their currency — have helped finance substantial real estate transactions, both urban and rural, as well as micro-enterprises.[61]

These kinds of achievements will hardly transform the big transnational commercial banks. But they have helped alert the major international financing institutions not only to women's growing capital needs, but to their talents for money management. According to Nancy Barry of Women's World Banking, the growing business of retailing credit may offer women high-level opportunities in global and national financial institutions — if only to reflect better the composition of their clients.[62]

CLOSING COMMENTS

This edition of ***women***2000 has sought to present some of the data with respect to women and decision-making in various sectors. It makes clear that 50 per cent of humanity — cutting across all classes and cultures — remains overwhelmingly underrepresented in public decision-making. Righting gender imbalance is not only a rights issue, but one of cost-effectiveness that involves the need to address the obstacles women face in fulfilling their rights to participation, including the stereotypes thrust upon them from childhood in every culture. Dismantling these obstacles, as well as the caricatures that foster and support them, is a central concern of the Beijing Platform for Action, the implementation of which will be reviewed in the year 2000 by the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women.

It is also clear that failure to include women in positions of power and influence is a waste of human creativity and energy that is increasingly unaffordable. The participation of all citizens is central to democracy and thereby to any concept of peace. Democratizing decision-making is served by mainstreaming women in decision-making.

What conclusions can be drawn from the available evidence about differences between male and female decision-makers? So far, none that can be advanced definitively. This issue of ***women***2000 has attempted to present a variety of views on the subject from many parts of the world.

Inconclusive as the evidence is currently, one point is clear: the styles and focus of women decision-makers — at various levels — reflects their structural position in society and the roles they typically play. The gender differences at work in every culture are reflected in the styles of both men and women decision-makers. In addition, the evidence suggests that once women achieve a critical mass, they have a chance to influence the agenda and to promote gender equality for the benefit of the society or community as a whole.

One of the problems in considering the question of "making a difference" is that the distinction between "change" and "transformation" may tend to be blurred. Some champions of excluded or subjugated groups have gone so far as to claim that the admission of that group to equitable power-sharing would save the world — perhaps unconscious of the burden, complexity and ultimate injustice imposed by such an expectation. But clearly, broadening women's access to positions of power and influence is likely to affect the agenda, and the status quo is more likely to be challenged.

This issue of ***women***2000 was compiled by the staff of the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women from material prepared in connection with expert group meetings organized by the Division and from other sources.

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Cover photo taken by Yassih Pougnet, UNOMSA Observer, shows a young girl during preparations for first non-racial general elections, East Rand, Katlehong, South Africa, April 1994.

women2000: Women and decision-making

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The Division for the Advancement of Women would appreciate your completion of this questionnaire as part of a survey to assess the relevance and quality of *women2000*. The aim is to improve future issues. Your reply will also help to determine the level of interest in this publication. All replies are confidential.

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Notable Events

13–17 October 1997
DAW, UNFPA, UNICEF and ECA
Expert Group Meeting on Adolescent Girls and their Rights
ECA Headquarters, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

9–12 November 1997
DAW and York University
Expert Group Meeting on Gender-based Persecution
York University, Toronto, Canada

30 November–2 December 1997
DAW and DSPD
Expert Group Meeting on Ageing Women and Care
International Institute on Ageing, Valletta, Malta

1–4 December 1997
DAW and Institute for Human Rights at Abo Akadmi
Expert Group Meeting on Promoting Women's Enjoyment of Their Economic and Social Rights
Abo/Turku, Finland

19 January–6 February 1998
CEDAW
18th session
UNHQ, New York

2–13 March 1998
Commission on the Status of Women
42nd session
UNHQ, New York

15 June–2 July 1998
CEDAW
19th session
UNHQ, New York

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- Commission on the Status of Women (http://www.un.org/dpcsd/daw/csw.htm)
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